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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #4052/01 1252202
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 052202Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4779
INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 7651
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAY 7947
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 3704
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 4341

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004052

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: OAS SAYS PARAMILITARY CRIMINAL RESURGENCE SERIOUS
BUT SMALLER THAN REPORTED; GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVE

REF: BOGOTA XXX

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood
Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

11. (C) Claudia Perez, the deputy director of the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process (OAS/MAPP), said that media reports of up to 4,000 demobilized paramilitaries returning to criminal activity mischaracterized a recent OAS report and were significantly exaggerated. The OAS believes about 400-500 former paramilitaries have returned to crime in specific regions, which she described as a serious development. Perez said the OAS Mission is tracking developments closely and is confident in its sources of information, which are primarily local residents in areas where the allegations of paramilitary recidivism are most prevalent. According to Perez, the GOC has acted upon OAS information about demobilized crimes and removed police and military officials who failed to inform the GOC of such activities. She said the OAS is preparing its seventh quarterly report, which will be released after the May 28 presidential election. The report will assess allegations about demobilized paramilitary members joining or forming criminal groups, paramilitaries who did not demobilize, and the GOC's reinsertion program. Perez noted that the report is, in general, "tough but positive." End summary.

Media Reports Exaggerated

12. (C) Perez said that after the OAS released its sixth quarterly report in February 2006, the press erroneously reported that 4,000 demobilized had rearmed. She said the number is more like 400-500 thus far. The OAS is unsure if the demobilized paramilitary leaders still have control of these groups. Perez noted the difficulty of getting this kind of information. She said, however, it is clear that some of the midlevel commanders have created criminal groups. Perez was concerned about the destruction of weapons confiscated from the demobilized paramilitaries. She said the GOC was reluctant to destroy weapons because they may be needed as evidence in upcoming trials. Perez rejected this argument, saying the weapons do not have any evidentiary value. She said, however, that the destruction of the arms would be a very important symbolic act for Colombians.

OAS Concerns

13. (C) Perez said the OAS Mission is continuing to follow the situations highlighted in its sixth report. It is particularly concerned about Norte de Santander and Narino Departments, largely because of high coca cultivation. In Norte de Santander, where there are 3-4 coca harvests annually, the OAS Mission is following reports of a group called Aguilas Negras ("Black Eagles") that is operating in the municipalities of Puerto Santander, Sardinata, and Tibu and possibly associated with the Bloque Central Bolivar. Complicating the situation is the presence of guerrillas in the area and the support that many sectors have traditionally given the paramilitaries there. Perez commented that observers from international organizations have had security problems there. She added, however, that although the Aguilas Negras have contracted demobilized paramilitaries, it cannot be said yet that it is wholly a group of demobilized paramilitaries. In Narino there are also reports of demobilized paramilitaries joining drug trafficking groups. Among the groups there are Rastrojas and Aguilas Negras. The OAS Mission is not sure yet if the Norte de Santander and the Narino Aguilas Negras are connected.

14. (C) Perez said that the OAS Mission is confident in its information. The OAS regional offices are getting confirmation from local residents that some demobilized paramilitaries are forming or are joining criminal groups. Perez emphasized the importance of the OAS Mission's regional offices to engender confidence among the inhabitants that it is safe to report criminal activity. She used the example of Tierradentro in Cordoba. Once people trusted the OAS representatives living in the region, they voiced their complaints. In contrast, in areas like Sucre and Bolivar, where there is no permanent office, visiting OAS officials found that the populace, local prosecutor, and human rights

office director, were all were too fearful to denounce local criminals and assured the officials that everything was fine in the area. Some, however, would pull the officials aside to tell them otherwise.

GOC Responsive, Angry at Local Officials' Failures

15. (C) Perez said the GOC was working to address the problems. For example, when the OAS Mission alerted the GOC to reports of former paramilitaries engaging in criminal activity with impunity in Tierradentro, GOC officials were angry that the local brigade commander had not reported what was going on. The GOC held a security council meeting in the area and people came and voiced their concerns. As a result, the GOC removed certain military and police officials who had allegedly been collaborating with the criminals. Later, OAS Mission Director Sergio Caramagna and OAS/MAPP officials met with top GOC personnel over other situations described in the sixth report in order not to blindsides the government with their findings. Perez said the Colombians wondered why their own governmental institutions (local police, military, prosecutor, human rights office director) had not reported what the OAS mission had observed. Nevertheless, according to Perez, the GOC has moved to address the trouble spots in the report. For example, it has increased state presence in Norte de Santander. On its own initiative, the government is analyzing what needs to be done to counter the problem in what it considers high-risk areas. Perez noted that the problem cannot be solved by army presence, there are not enough soldiers to cover all the areas. She stressed that alternative development projects were the key to a permanent resolution.

Next OAS Report After Presidential Election

16. (C) Perez said the OAS is drafting its seventh quarterly report, scheduled to be released after the May 28 presidential election. She said the report will address

similar issues to those the OAS raised in its sixth report: criminal activities by paramilitaries (demobilized or not), and the GOC's reinsertion program. Perez said the report was not yet in final draft but its overall tone would be "tough but positive."

Justice and Peace Law Prosecutions

¶17. (C) Perez said the Fiscalía (Prosecutor General) had selected 13 of 20 prosecutors for the Justice and Peace Unit.

They are all experienced, well trained in human rights issues, and have strong knowledge of Colombian regional issues. All the candidates for these positions are undergoing thorough vetting processes. She was told by the person in charge of the effort that prosecutors are collecting evidence against the paramilitaries who are seeking Justice and Peace Law benefits. For example, they are not only taking Salvatore Mancuso's declaration of what he has done, but are going to the regions where he operated and digging for information, getting witness testimony, etc. Perez said the Supreme Council of the Judiciary will soon appoint eight magistrates to preside over Justice and Peace cases. The candidates will also undergo thorough vetting processes before being selected. Perez said the OAS expects about 600 cases to be tried initially.

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